

## **The Ottawa Debate**

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The first debate between Lincoln and Douglas occurred on August 21, 1858, in Ottawa, Illinois. Both men were campaigning for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Douglas aggressively questioned Lincoln about slavery, putting Lincoln on the defensive. After the debate, a reporter from the *Chicago Press and Tribune* advised Lincoln to “Charge Chester! Charge!” during the upcoming debate at Freeport, Illinois. That is exactly what Lincoln did. He asked Douglas whether the “people of a United States territory...[could] exclude slavery from its limits prior to the formation of a state constitution.” Douglas’ affirmative answer to this question became known as the Freeport Doctrine, and it ruined his reputation in the South and probably cost him the presidential election of 1860.

Lincoln and Douglas began their political careers in the Illinois State Legislature. Douglas went on to become a U.S. Senator, while Lincoln retired temporarily from political life in 1849 after serving in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1854, Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that had restricted slavery to the South by forbidding its expansion into western territories. The Kansas-Nebraska Act made it possible for the citizens of a territory to decide to form a slave state. Lincoln’s strong disagreement with the Kansas-Nebraska Act brought him back into politics, saying “I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again.”

Lincoln and Douglas held starkly contrasting ideas on slavery. Lincoln was always against slavery although he thought that the constitutional rights of slaveholders

should be respected. In the Ottawa debate, Lincoln read from an 1854 speech he had delivered in Peoria. He said that “If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution.” He felt strongly, however, that slavery should not be allowed to expand. Douglas, on the other hand, believed that states have the right to choose between being slave or free, although he was not actually proslavery.

In his opening speech at Ottawa, Douglas supported popular sovereignty, the notion that states have the right to decide on their own about things such as the answer to the slavery question. Douglas then listed the abolitionist resolutions of the Republican Party and interrogated Lincoln with a long list of questions about his alleged endorsement of them. Lincoln, however, was only moderately antislavery, and Douglas’ source, a newspaper clipping about Lincoln’s endorsement of the Republican platform, was later found to be incorrect. Douglas went on to criticize Lincoln’s House Divided speech, claiming that the Founding Fathers knew what they were doing and that “Mr. Lincoln and the Republican party set themselves up as wiser than these men who made this Government, which has flourished for seventy years under the principle of popular sovereignty, recognizing the right of each state to do as it pleased.” Douglas then asked the audience to consider the consequences of allowing freed slaves to become citizens. Douglas also criticized Lincoln’s opposition to the Supreme Court decision *Dred Scott v. Sanford*.

In his rebuttal, Lincoln seemed surprised by Douglas’ attack. Although he denied involvement in the Republican platform, he did not otherwise directly answer Douglas’ questions. Rather than stating his position on slavery, he chose to read a long passage from his Peoria speech. In it, he said that “There is no reason in the world why the Negro

is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Lincoln then denounced popular sovereignty and expressed his disapproval of the Dred Scott decision. He pointed out that the next Supreme Court decision on slavery could allow free states the right to become slave states, and that was something Lincoln dreaded.

Lincoln and Douglas, despite these differences, both believed strongly in the importance of the Union. In his House Divided speech, Lincoln said that “I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.” Douglas ended his comments in the Ottawa debate by saying that “This new doctrine preached by Mr. Lincoln and his party will dissolve the union if it succeeds.” In other words, Douglas believed that Lincoln’s position on slavery would lead to war between the North and South. In addition, both men believed that the issue of slavery would be the United State’s downfall. It is not surprising, then, that during the Civil War Douglas adamantly supported President Lincoln as he attempted to save the Union. In fact, the day after hearing that Fort Sumter had been attacked, Lincoln and Douglas met to discuss how to handle the war.

Shortly after the Ottawa debate, Lincoln said “The fire flew some, and I am glad to know I am yet alive.” One of his friends advised him to “hold Dug [Douglas] up as a traitor and conspirator, a pro-slavery bamboozling demagogue.” Lincoln came back fighting in the next debate. He answered all of Douglas’ questions and presented Douglas with four new questions, one of which resulted in the Freeport Doctrine. It was a question which may have earned Lincoln the presidency. Douglas’ reputation was damaged as a result, especially in the South, while Lincoln became nationally recognized

because of the seven debates he had with Douglas. [From David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*; “First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas,” Lincoln Home. <<http://www.nps.gov//debate1.htm>> (Sept. 9, 2007); Philip Van Doren Stern, ed. *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*; and Paul Simon, *Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness*.]